

Helping Dyslexic Students to Negotiate the Challenges of Essay-Writing: a case study

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Context

The student body on the BA English Language Studies degree (BA ELS) at London Metropolitan University (London Met) consists of a diverse mix, with many students with 'non-standard' entry qualifications. Each year we have been referring roughly a quarter of our Home-status students to Student Services for dyslexia screening.

Whilst we are aware of the criticisms of essays as a mode of assessment, e.g. Glasner, (1999), Lea and Street (1999), Lillis (2003), and English (2007), the currently validated degree demands that students on BA ELS will write approximately nineteen of them in their three years with us. There is a *subject-specific* structure and register in these essays, which tend to have elements both of scientific description and of argumentation. Regarding style, there is no compulsion to write in the third person ('It is claimed that...' etc); a high level of indirect critical citation is important, however (Hyland, 2004)

As a result of poorly structured essays submitted by First Years, Steve Jones [my colleague on BA ELS] and I carried out a survey among First Semester students in Autumn 2006¹. The voice of one dyspraxic students was "*There's no crack of the whip -* "meaning that he needed pushing to do the reading for the essay all the way through the module. Another dyslexic student stated:- "*I know about the introduction and the conclusion, but I'm not sure how to progress the argument...*"

These students were not alone. As a result we incorporated essay-writing tutorials and techniques into the three-hour core First Year module *Introduction to Texts: Written and Spoken* (LE1003).

As Wingate (2006) states, few of the students who most need support find their way to bolt-on units within institutions of Higher Education. Many of the activities we used fitted nicely with those recommended on the Certificate of Teaching Adult

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Dyslexics in Higher Education. After beginning to follow the Certificate, I was able to add more visual kinds of support.

Why Essay Planning is so Problematic for Dyslexic Students

The word 'dyslexia' comes from the Greek and means 'difficulty with words'. There are many definitions of dyslexia but one of the most helpful is that given by the British Dyslexia Association (BDA), which highlights why dyslexic students have problems with essay-writing as it lists the major cognitive difficulties experienced by dyslexic students.

Dyslexia is a specific learning difficulty, which is neurobiological in origin and persists across the lifespan. It is characterised by difficulties with phonological processing, rapid naming, working memory, processing speed and the automatic development of skills ... unexpected in relation to an individual's other cognitive abilities. These processing difficulties can undermine the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills, ..., and have an effect on verbal communication, organisation and adaptation to change. Their impact can be mitigated by correct teaching, strategy development and the use of information technology. (BDA 1999)

Essay-writing is dependent on many of the skills which dyslexic students find difficult such as:

- Reading the question correctly
- Processing what the question is actually asking the student to do
- Selecting and reading all the relevant material
- Sequencing and organising the material into a coherent whole
- Presenting the essay in an acceptable way with correct paragraphing, grammar and spelling

The two things, which greatly assist dyslexic students with specific learning deficits are tutorial support and assistive technology. These are particularly helpful if used in conjunction with each other.

Dyslexia Tutorial Support

Dyslexia tutors help students to express their knowledge in the best possible way by assisting them to 'unpack' the question, by looking specifically at the type of question asked, type of answer required, the key words used in the question, and the general issues around the question. Then tutors can move on to helping dyslexic students to write a theme, which is a sentence or two stating what the student is going to say in the essay. This can be elaborated into the introduction. Tutors can also helpfully show students methods of visualising the essay in sections

of specific numbers of words depending on the length of the essay. (Hargeaves 2007)

In the module, *Introduction to Texts Written and Spoken*, this translates as:

Total Length of Essay	1200 words
Introduction	120 words roughly
Description of an accent, Received Pronunciation	3 paragraphs of 150-200 words roughly
Arguing whether this accent is important in current Britain or not?	3 paragraphs of 150-200 words
Conclusion	120 words

After ‘unpacking’ the question a good method of putting down all the ideas is to ‘brainstorm’ using a concept or mind map. This can be very usefully done with mind mapping software such as *Inspiration*, *Mind Manager* or *Mind Genius* depending on the student’s preference. Unfortunately these software packages are not available to dyslexic students at London Metropolitan until they have gone through a lengthy screening and assessment process. In *Introduction to Texts*, therefore, planning is done on the board and students are issued with a diagram on paper. Once the mind map is complete and all possibilities have been explored, students should write a theme for the essay, which encapsulates the main ideas and can be developed into the opening paragraph. Students are then in a very good position to read productively on the topic, knowing the direction the essay will take. In *‘Introduction to Texts: Written and Spoken’* (LE1003) essential reading material leading up to the essay is collated into a Reader with introductory notes, saving time searching in the library.

The Use of Assistive Technology

Many students find it helpful to use text-reading software such as *Texthelp Read and Write* or *ClaroRead* (publisher) to help them read textbooks and sections from the Internet.

With textbooks, sections can be scanned so that students can thus read and hear at the same time. The software assists the students as they can often hear an error, when the text is read back, more easily than they can see it. Editing can be done as the student composes or at the end, or both. Some students who have problems with composing on a word processor find that they are helped by the use of voice-activated software such as *Dragon Naturally Speaking*. This can be successful but requires the student to train the software. Again, these types of software are not available to dyslexic students until they have undergone screening and assessment.

Other Innovations in the module *Introduction to Texts*

Many threads of teaching and learning lead up to a successful final essay. We attempt to present information with active student involvement, following a largely constructivist approach. (Bruner, 1966; Bean, 2001). The following types of support and activities have proved invaluable:

A. At the Knowledge Acquisition Stage

1. Module handbooks and handouts on coloured paper (usually red or yellow) for potential dyslexic students. Showing items on screen from *Web learn* is not enough.
2. A basic alphabetic glossary of new linguistic terms, added to by students during group work sessions (Fitzgibbon and O'Connor, 2002, p.22); mind maps encouraged as an alternative.
3. Summarising and critical reading activities within tutorial time (pro forma sheets provided), hopefully leading to different reading speeds for different types of excerpt. (McLoughlin, Leather and Stringer, 2002 p.158)
4. Portfolio of summaries required during semester – to lead up to essay
5. Students view several sample essays and apply the mark scheme
6. Essay titles provided early in semester (by *third* week when module membership has settled down).

B. Just Before/at the Writing Stage of the Essay

1. Points made in class discussion audio-recorded / collected on flip chart then put into essay frame thus highlighting differences between a fragmented collection of class opinions and linear argument
2. The use of paragraph frames (point, evidence, comment)
3. Encouragement to dyslexic students to make use of friends as scribes (composing and simultaneously scribing can be difficult for most of them)

C. At the editing stage of the essay

1. Assistance by Write Now CETL trained student mentors during a classessay-editing workshop (cf. Harrington, 2007)
2. Demonstration of use of Haywood's Academic Word List Highlighter (<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~alzsh3/acvocab/awlhighlighter.htm>), so students can check written work to see if it has an academic feel (addressing students' lexical concerns).
3. Provision of Referring to lists of verbs of citation ('claims', 'states' etc), distinguishing between approving, neutral and critical ones (emphasising lexis)

Conclusion and Comment on Effectiveness

In the module *Introduction to Texts: Written and Spoken* (LE1003), the process of essay-writing is integrated into teaching by the use of a variety of dyslexia-friendly teaching and learning methods. With our range of students, the activities outlined for tutorials have been very popular and have led to better structured essays, and fewer ones which are 'off title'. There is greater clarity of expectations and procedures and to an increase in confidence among students. Only occasionally do we have an outstanding student for whom some of the tutorial activities seem unnecessary.

After this module dyslexic students will still need help constructing essays, and they will still have to learn that tutors' expectations will differ slightly. It has been mooted that the university will may move to a three-module semester. This development could assist dyslexic students with their assessed essays by providing more continuity than at present.

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Biographical note:

Marion Colledge has taught aspects of Applied Linguistics, Education, English as a foreign Language and English for Specific Purposes in a variety of educational settings in the UK, and has also worked in the Ivory Coast, Eastern Europe and China. Current interests include academic writing, student self-assessment, student-tutor feedback and interaction, dyslexia and dyspraxia. She is currently Module Leader for a variety of modules on the BA English Language Studies and is also ERASMUS Exchange Tutor for BA ELS. Marion has been following the Postgraduate Certificate of Teaching Adult Dyslexic Students in Higher Education.

Sandra Hargreaves is the Course Leader for PGC in Teaching Adult Dyslexic Learners in Higher Education and the PGDip in Assessment for Specific Learning Difficulties (Dyslexia) at London Metropolitan University. She also operates a consultancy called 'Mind Aligned' which covers a range of different activities including diagnosing dyslexia and supporting dyslexic adults both in higher education and the workplace. Prior to this she was involved in dyslexia support at Thames Valley University, the Inner London Probation Service and Uxbridge College. Sandra previously worked for many years in Australia at Macquarie University in the Teacher Education Programme where she was the Course Leader of the Secondary English Team.